



**Blanche Vulliamy**

From a series of 77 pastels of WW1 searchlights

Pastel on paper, 1914–18

© Colchester & Ipswich Museum Service

---



**Hayley Field**  
*Ben's Jacket*  
Oil on board, 75 x 76 cm  
2014

**FRANCES SPALDING**

## **OBSCURE SECURE**

*Obscure Secure* is a deceptively modest project behind which lies bold and original thought. Three artists, Claudia Böse, Hayley Field and Jacqueline Utley, aware that Ipswich Borough Council owns work by certain women artists, proposed an exhibition. And the result, shown in this town's Christchurch Mansion, was a wall of pictures, some by Böse, Field and Utley, amid an array of paintings in a variety of styles by earlier women artists, all, aside from Prunella Clough, not particularly well known today. But fame was not the issue. All these pictures had a voice, a sensibility, and in some cases a sensuality, which, cumulatively, created a visual dance, made even more exuberant by the break with conventional hanging, for these exhibits rose up and across the wall in an order that seemed open, possibly haphazard. Certainly it was an arrangement in which any notion of a hierarchy of importance had been discarded.

To have a work of art bought by a museum or public gallery is, for the artist, an accolade. But all too often, even in major collections, like that of the Tate, it is also a kiss of death, for the work soon disappears into the racks in the stores, where it remains unseen, secure but obscured.

This doesn't only happen to paintings. There is some inherent ambiguity in our society and culture that works to assist and then confine women. It gives them places at art schools and in university Fine Art departments, where nowadays they form a preponderance over men. But more solo exhibitions still go to male artists, and the percentage of works by men in major public collections still vastly surpasses that of women artists, though this situation has slightly improved in recent years.

So perhaps, in a subtle way, *Obscure Secure* hints at a possible inversion. Insecurity, such as that which Tracey Emin so boldly revealed in her early career, may be one route to greater visibility. But this is not for everyone, for creativity sometimes seems to need dull, shadowy, dark passages as well eventual visibility. Conflicts abound, necessarily. 'Why,' asks Katherine Hilberry in Virginia Woolf's novel *Night and Day*, 'should there be this perpetual disparity between the thought and the action, between the life of solitude and the life of society, this astonishing precipice on one side of which the soul was active and in broad daylight, on the other side of which it was contemplative and dark as night? Was it not possible to step from one to the other, erect and without essential change?'

Like Woolf, we can acknowledge this 'perpetual disparity', so neatly encapsulated in obscure/secure, but we can also, like her, long for change.



*Obscure Secure*  
The Wolsey Gallery  
Christchurch Mansion, Ipswich

STEPHANIE MORAN

## EXTRACT FROM ACTS OF RETRIEVAL AND CONCEPTION, OR, PAINTING INTUITION

*'We want to be judged on our painting'*



Hayley Field  
*Creekside* (detail)  
Oil on board, 40 x 40 cm  
2014

How much are creative processes connected to gender? When biologically and neuro-biologically founded instinct and intuition inform working processes, does that make painting inherently gendered? Or is there a process of temporal retrieval of painting substance that comes from a pre-subjective, pre-gendered biological? There do not appear to be universals of process and material particular to women. As Linda Nochlin points out, women artists don't share a style with each other so much as with their contemporaries. Nochlin positions the question 'why have there been no great women artists?' as a socio-economic one of opportunity and power, responding with an enquiry into what the conditions for 'great artists' are.<sup>1</sup> How important is the 'feminist rewriting of the history of art in terms which firmly locate gender relations as a determining factor in cultural production and signification?'<sup>2</sup>

...Bright **magenta** and **peachy** teeth puncture upwards swallowing blackened **quinacridone violet** bruised depths, beneath fresh **peppermint**, traces of **pink** drizzling the **green** verticals, all thickly softly merging except for the incision of sharp saw-edges...

...Linking this triad of artist curators are practices that draw on 'intuition' and 'instinct'... which, on cross-examination, relate to remembering... *If thought* is an act, and painting a process *modelling* thought, what structures these thought-acts? Intuition is a component of thinking, a grasping of patterns in order to operate in a hostile, inherently

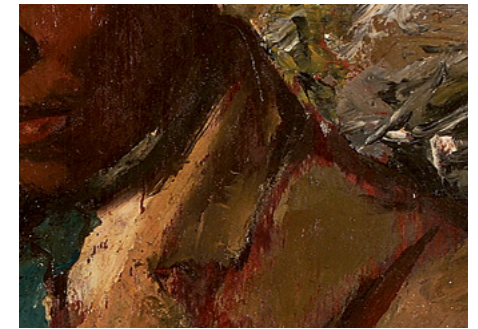
foreign and deeply unknowable world environment<sup>3</sup>... Where intuition demonstrates a fundamental human neurobiological response, instinct may form its embodied counterpart qua set of sense memory reflexes.<sup>4</sup>

Hayley Field's *Creekside* is delivered from a memory of the shape and sense-feeling of a hole in a fence... The intuition abstraction lies in the desire for autonomy or cutting (off) and the way that she isolates the memory-form. This 'pure mutilation: amputating form from the sensible matter' enacts Negarestani's conceptualization of rudimentary abstraction as a procedure of pure cruelty. The 'abstracting cut' fragments and withdraws, allows a close reading of what the paint does when separated from the image.

...Detail. A part cut out. [*New World*]  
**Golden ochres** cut with **red-brown** slashes...  
Oscillation between **red** and **turquoise** pushing forward and back...  
Gestural violence is reiterated in all-over extraneous **red** splatters, outlines and highlights.

Zoom out. A **red-brown** boy dressed in jacket and tie looks down, contemplative. The calm pose sits uneasy with crude brush marks...

For Negarestani, intuition must undergo a rigorous process... to harness the transformative potential of abstraction... [to] 'change the shape of thought' through a mathematically rigorous approach that breaks intuitive patterns of thought.<sup>5</sup> But the *Obscure Secure* paintings come out another



Helen Kiddall  
*New World* (detail)  
Oil on board, 34 x 24 cm  
c.1950–1960

tradition of abstraction, the Modernist breaking down of Enlightenment's mathematically based compositional form and central perspective. They belong to a desire for an affective abstraction... There may be a retrieval, dredged out of the deep time of body and mind through the act of painting, from the artist's pre-subjective biological memories and desires, as Julia Kristeva suggests occurs in Bellini's paintings, through the (re)construction of pre-linguistic and pre-symbolic chromatic spaces<sup>6</sup>... Intuition... may be materially and biologically based<sup>7</sup>... As such, the experience is *pre*-subjective, *pre*-symbolic, and per se, following Lacan, *pre*-gendered...

1 Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' (1971), in *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*, 1988, p.145

2 Griselda Pollock, 'Vision and Difference', p.17

3 Reza Negarestani and James Trafford speaking at 'Radical Geometries', Tate Britain, 10 December 2014

4 Reza Negarestani, *Torture Concrete*, 2014

5 Negarestani, *ibid*

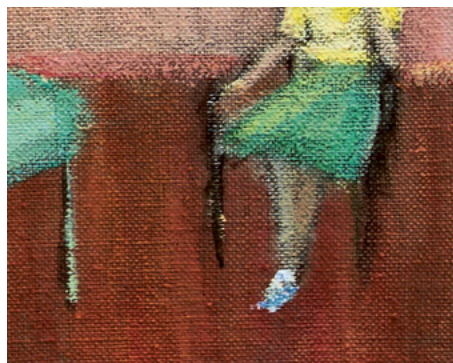
Claudia Böse's abstract forms and spaces consciously attempt to confine, through her process... 'the historical'... The envisioned heaviness, crustiness and shininess of bodies and the layers of remembering embed themselves phenomenologically and affectively in the layers of paint built up over an extended time, and in the use of colour as emotional tone ... The 'intuitive, instinctive' use of space and colour which are affectively psychological, attempt to uncover what may be hidden or obscure...

Hazy white striations beam out over cloudy RAF-blue-grey and navy grounds, deep charcoal architectural shapes rise vertically into twilight gloom.

Böse's organic abstract memory images of war contrast with Blanche Vulliamy's sharp pastels graphically depicting World War searchlights in darkened streets... She records searchlights flaring through urban streets, delineating a real, observed pattern of wartime night light...

... Delicately crusted, creamy light band above, grey shadows beneath seep through in verticals, dropping along nicotine yellow stain emerging from under scratched dusky rose... onto rusted bloody-streaked stripe below. Thick strokes of white over pastel shades float on a shocking pool of deep orange-red...

Jacqueline Utley's paintings combine imagined and real histories through her process, working between idealistically envisioned non-hierarchical groups in flattened spaces and collage... unlike



**Jacqueline Utley**  
*Hannah, Jean, Ella* (detail)  
Oil on linen, 25 x 40 cm  
2014

Vermeer's... women their immersion is social as they labour in groups. Utley reverses Vermeer's roles—the *Lacemaker* is the artist herself, toiling alone in the studio as she paints the canvas surface over and over, dreams of utopian collectivity notwithstanding...

The introspection of Anna Airy's central female figure... [in] *Trinkets* (1951), contrasts with the realist paintings of workers in factories she made while employed as a war artist... from housewifely domestic solitude to socially outward-looking participation in the war effort, Anna Airy observing and painting furiously in the heat of molten shells burning the shoes off her feet in the gaze of the workers' relentless rhythm, all engaged in 'socially useful collective activity'...

...Deeper pink tones, watery and firewarmed pale magentas pull away from cool loose blues, flesh-greens and yellows,

rounded shapes of colour contained more or less by series' of curling black lines, knotted, coiled-up towards the middle in glowing domestic vortex.

*Obscure Secure* operates as an art historical documentation of women's practices from a specific location and within a particular time frame. In answer to the question of how important is the 'feminist rewriting of the history of art in terms which firmly locate gender relations as a determining factor in cultural production and signification'? I would suggest that while being valuable for art historians, for practicing artists it is more essential to engage the structures of power... *Obscure Secure* approaches power structures via a tactic of DIY exhibition organisation that could be considered as what Maria Lind terms 'social abstraction'.<sup>8</sup> It can be read in terms of the move towards a kind of artistic independence or 'autonomy', in the vein of current art discourses about



**Anna Airy**  
*Trinkets* (detail)  
Pastel, 48 x 59 cm  
1951

'exit' and 'escape'. Like Negarestani's 'cut' of abstraction, does engaging power structures not require some form of inherently violent force?... As Nochlin states: 'Those who have privileges inevitably hold on to them... until compelled to bow to superior power of one sort or another.'<sup>9</sup>

But what is the territory of painting triangulated by this project...? The paintings have an inclination to abstract what is known or observed... and give them new structures or patterns based on an 'intuition' or 'instinct'... functioning as forms of remembering rather than cognitions 'not determined by a previous cognition of the same object'.<sup>10</sup> The works recall, commemorate, represent and wishfully anticipate different social orders; they explore minor histories to reveal experiences often hidden or unrepresented. There may be some (inconclusive) use of 'biologically and neurobiologically founded instinct and intuition' in the choice of colour and the way that images and memories are transcribed into paint (gesturally, signatorially). According to Negarestani's theorizing of intuition as human

6 Julia Kristeva, 'Motherhood According to Bellini' in 'Desire in Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art', 1980, p.242–243

7 Peter Fuller, 'Art and Psychoanalysis', 1980, p.166

8 Maria Lind, *Abstraction*, 2013, in introduction p.20

9 Nochlin, op. cit., p.152

10 Charles S. Peirce, 'Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man', *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* (1868) 2, 103–114

[www.peirce.org/writings/p26.html#notemark1](http://www.peirce.org/writings/p26.html#notemark1)

neurobiological response, there would be no reason to presume an essentially gendered neuro-biological... [This is supported by Julia Kristeva and Peter Fuller's hypotheses around] painting process: painted forms may be pre-symbolic, escaping language, and therefore there is nothing to connect creative processes to gender... Gender is introduced in power and social structures, in the way that painting is received, framed, and viewed (or not)...

The use of intuition maintains the 'emotional and intuitional' tradition of abstraction outlined by Barr,<sup>11</sup> continued through 80's psychological readings by writers such as Kristeva and Fuller, and still persisting in an 'affective turn'... Intuition as a premise may be overly vague, anti-intellectual mystification, obscuration or reaction; it may over-

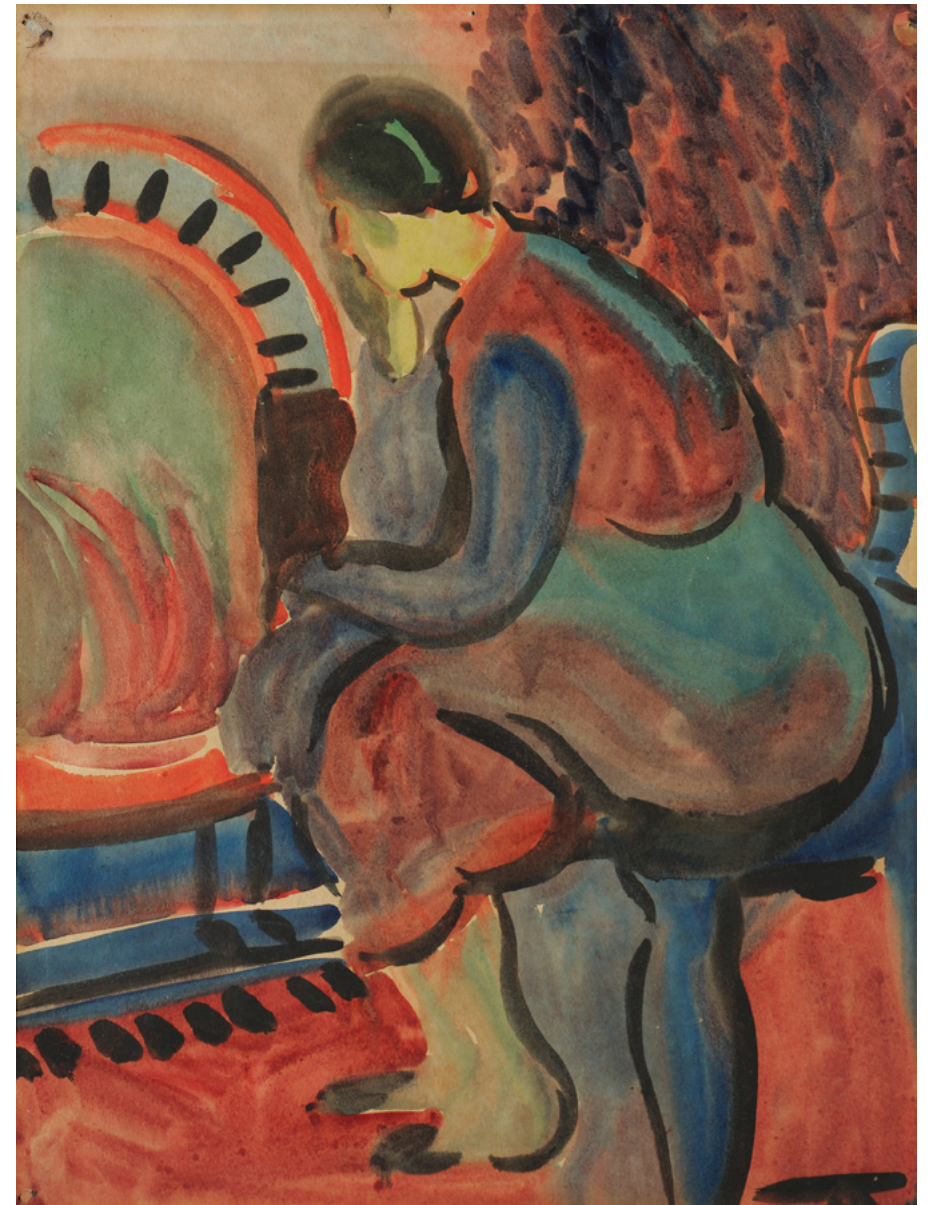
privilege the body, in 'embodiment' and reliance on instinct in itself without the necessary 'intertwining of intuition and reason' to complete the 'act of thought'.<sup>12</sup> The kind of potential Negarestani describes for 'bootlegging' and 'changing the shape of thought' through mathematical abstraction may have an equivalent in abstract affectivity and its 'structures of feeling', but these need to be thought rigorously and specifically in art to be meaningful or useful...

**Sensible solid female mass on a chair in front of a hearth, leaning in towards the flame warmth...**

*Text © Stephanie Moran, 2015*

<sup>11</sup> Alfred H. Barr Jr, catalogue introduction 'Cubism and Abstract Art', *New York: The Museum of Modern Art*, 1936, p.19

<sup>12</sup> James Trafford, op. cit.



Kathleen Walne  
*Girl sitting by fire*  
Watercolour, 35 x 26cm, c.1930s  
With kind permission of Hilary Ward

LYNDSAY COOK

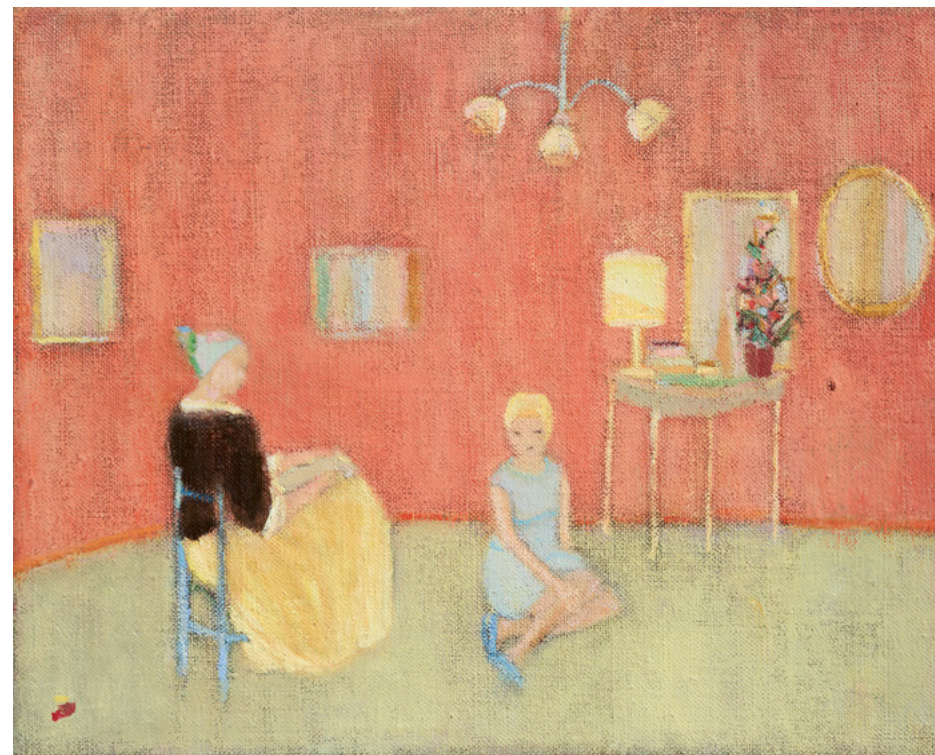
OBSCURE SECURE  
AT CHRISTCHURCH  
MANSION

It is a wonderful thing to put forgotten work back on display but what I find most special about *Obscure Secure* are the discussions it generates. Not only the communication between the artists working on it but the conversations present between their work and the work made by artists years before them. It is a very social exhibition which moves away from the stereotype of the solitary artist in a refreshing way. On a base level these are simply paintings hung on a gallery wall, but on another they are about a collection of people all trying to work things out on a two-dimensional surface.

It is a defining act for a painter to scrape off a day's work and begin again the next and perhaps the process of painting is a challenging thing. Perhaps people do not want to acknowledge the physical and mental scaffolding behind a finished work but *Obscure Secure* has taken process out of the studio space and out of the archives in a very advantageous way, creating a playful energy which needs to be seen, and of course discussed.

*Extracts from an online review by  
Lyndsay Cook for InSuffolk, October 2014*

From a lesser known piece by Anna Airy, one of the first women to be officially commissioned as a war artist, to a dreamlike landscape by child prodigy Peggy Somerville, the contemporary artists have unearthed not just the work but the lives of those who came before them. Included in the exhibition is seemingly a homage to these narratives, a plan chest containing newspaper cuttings and inventories from previous exhibitions. But, more importantly, there are also glimpses of the processes behind the work, snippets of sketches captured on the back of old envelopes and jotted notes of inspiration. Process is really what *Obscure Secure* is all about.



**Jacqueline Utley**  
*Lace Nightingale Sings*  
Oil on linen, 20 x 25 cm  
2014



**Connie Winn**  
*The Girl with Yellow Hat*  
Oil on panel, 36 x 30 cm, c.1973  
Ipswich Borough Council collection

**CLAUDIA BÖSE, HAYLEY FIELD  
JACQUELINE UTLEY**

## **ABOUT OBSCURE SECURE**

*Obscure Secure* began with a mutual interest in looking at artists' processes. For over a year we had discussions, made studio visits and met once with psychoanalyst Valerie Sinason. We started to consider how an audience viewing paintings might engage with ideas around process.

Meeting curator Emma Roodhouse gave us the opportunity to explore work in the collection by women artists at Christchurch Mansion in Ipswich. We focussed on paintings made by women born in the late 19th and early 20th century - around the same time as our grandmothers. We discovered artists that resonated with our own lives and practices. It felt a privilege and a responsibility to explore these women's work and lives and decide how we could best represent them - would they approve?

Our research resulted in an exhibition of selected paintings from the collection along with new work made by us in response at the Wolsey Art Gallery, Christchurch Mansion. The hang reflected our intention to devise a playful way of engaging an audience. A series of talks explored themes such as working with collections, process and the

representation of women artists' lives and work.

The move to Studio 1.1 gave us the opportunity to reflect on our ideas in a contemporary space. Photographic reproductions of the work from the collection were hung beside our paintings in a reconfiguration of the original exhibition.

We could not have achieved all of this without the many wonderful contributions and support for *Obscure Secure*.

Thank you to the artists from the collection: Anna Airy, Prunella Clough, E M Every, Lucy Harwood, Helen Kiddall, Beatrice Lithiby, Peggy Somerville, Effie Spring-Smith, Blanche Georgiana Vulliamy, Kathleen Walne, Connie Winn.

Thank you also to: Arts Council England, Douglas Atfield, Emma Cameron, Caravan, Andrew Clarke, Colchester and Ipswich Museums, Lyndsay Cook, David Falk, Andrew and Margaret Field, Martha Fleming, Jane Frederick, Etholle George, InSuffolk.com, Ipswich Community Radio, Keran James, Michael Keenan, Jayne Knight, Jayne Lindill, Stephanie Moran, Mali Morris, Robert Pacitti, Paint Club East, Clare Price, Emma Roodhouse, Valerie Sinason, Dominic Sorensen, Frances Spalding, Saskia Stent and team, Darren Stevens, Studio 1.1, Molly Thomson, Andrew Vass, Graham Webber.

Photography: Douglas Atfield  
Design: caravanstudio.co.uk



Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**



**Colchester+Ipswich  
Museums**





**Claudia Böse**  
*Pink-without-a-name*  
Oil on board, 22 x 40 cm  
2014

---